

The world is failing women and girls whose bodies have been weaponized
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Lilianne Ploumen

Remember [#BringBackOurGirls](#)? It was a cry for help by the families of the girls from Chibok in Nigeria. Their daughters were [abducted by Boko Haram in 2014](#). Some have been released, others are still held. Survivors tell horrific stories of rape and forced marriages. Remember Mount Sinjar in Iraq? Thousands of Yazidi families took refuge from Isis on the mountain in 2014. Others fell into the militants' hands. Women were [sold into sexual slavery](#), held captive and raped.

And the Rohingya, forced to [flee their villages](#) in Myanmar in 2017? Women and girls saw relatives burned, tortured and murdered. They were [raped by Myanmar's armed forces](#). They related their traumatic experiences to members of the UN security council during a long-awaited official visit to Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh.

In countless conflicts, rival parties weaponise women's bodies as part of their strategy – has anyone been held accountable?

Rape has been acknowledged as a weapon of war since the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. But this has not stopped perpetrators from carrying out such atrocities.

As [research from the Overseas Development Institute shows](#), even when conflict subsides, the conditions in which girls and women are left puts them at risk of sexual violence.

The UN security council has the power to act. It can issue sanctions against a country and specifically include sexual violence against women and girls as a reason. Perpetrators can be hit by a travel ban, have their financial assets frozen, and an arms embargo can be implemented. It can make them pariahs of the international community, and rightly so.

However, [research by Georgetown University](#) shows that targeted sanctions for sexual violence are mostly not being used.

For example, the sanctions regime against Libya, [where rape has been widespread](#), ignores sexual violence. The sanctions regime on Yemen does not include gender-based violence as a criterion by which individuals can be sanctioned. Yet a recent report confirms again that [rape is one of the atrocities](#) that are taking place. The sanctions regime against Central African Republic is the only one that includes gender-based violence as a key criterion.

Why is the security council failing to make these sanction regimes work? Politics. Bringing justice to women and girls is too often crushed by powerplay, geopolitical manoeuvring, multifaceted negotiation strategies and economic interests.

We can do better: we should aim for one worldwide sanctions regime to address sexual and gender-based violence in conflict. One that will sanction all those who weaponise women's bodies and that can be applied regardless of borders. One regime that can be implemented without ongoing, fruitless debates – perpetrators of sexual violence should be sanctioned regardless of what the security council wants.

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In his [annual report to the security council on women, peace and security](#), the UN secretary general, António Guterres, has suggested such a regime.

Individuals and entities who conduct conflict-related sexual violence would be listed and all UN states would be required to apply sanctions against them. It would bring justice for women and girls and enforce security council resolution 1820, adopted in 2008, which condemns the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. No more negotiating country by country, vulnerable to the geopolitics of the day.

A worldwide sanctions regime against international terrorism already exists, created in 2001 by the security council. It targeted Osama bin Laden and associates as terrorists and made it possible to sanction every individual associated with him. Currently, it targets members of the Taliban, al-Qaida, Isis and associated groups. This reaffirms that peace and security transcends borders, and provides evidence of the value of worldwide, thematic sanctions to address global threats.

At my request, the [Netherlands](#) government has committed to assess the feasibility of such a regime for sexual violence. I have asked Sweden, Denmark and Belgium to do the same. I call on all other UN security council members to put their weight behind this proposal.

The UK, as a permanent member of the security council, can play an important role, given the emphasis on the rights of women and girls in its development and security policies.

We have an opportunity now to hold sexual terrorists accountable. We must acknowledge the fact that we have fallen short of our duty in the UN and work to reverse this now to bring justice to women and girls.

Lilianne Ploumen is a Dutch MP and former minister of international trade and development cooperation. She is founder of women's rights organisation [SheDecides](#) and distinguished fellow of the Overseas Development Institute